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Reflection/Reflected The Construction of Female Subjectivity in Elizabeth Bowen's The Last September and The Death of the Heart

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REFLECTION/REFLECTED
The Construction of Female Subjectivity in
Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September* and *The Death of the Heart*

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Department of English

Western Kentucky University

Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

Laura Nicole Bartlett

December 1997

REFLECTION/REFLECTED
The Construction of Female Subjectivity in
Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September* and *The Death of the Heart*

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REFLECTION/REFLECTED
The Construction of Female Subjectivity in
Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September* and *The Death of the Heart*

Laura Bartlett December 1997 57 Pages

Directed by: Karen Schneider, Jim Flynn, and Ted Hovet

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As I read Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September* and *The Death of the Heart*, questions arose, persisted, and remained unanswered until I undertook the project of applying poststructuralist theories to these novels. Reading *The Last September*, I puzzled over the female protagonist's relationship to an ancillary character, which Bowen repeatedly represents in terms of the father-daughter relationship. Reading both *The Last September* and *The Death of the Heart*, I was struck by the fact that although Bowen is typically categorized as a "classical realist," she embarks upon the quest of depicting the identity construction of two female adolescents but abandons the representations of her main characters at the end of each novel—without completion or explication. Finally, I noticed in each novel remarkable attention to the relationship between language and identity. Particularly, in *The Death of the Heart*, explicit attention is given to the female's role as "author." I questioned the presence of these ambiguous, disconcerting issues in novels by a "classical realist."

None of these issues has been specifically addressed by Bowen's critics, but by applying poststructuralist theories to these novels I acquired insights

which “answer” my questions. Primarily, I have relied upon the psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan, but I have also applied a multitude of theories provided by feminist and deconstructionalist theorists. I do not assume that Bowen wrote her novels with an awareness or conscious complicity with these theories, but I do suggest that these novels raise issues which poststructuralist theories provide an unprecedented “lens” to observe and address. While Bowen, obviously, did not have access to these specific theories, the issues which they address were indisputably a factor in her life. As an Anglo-Irish female author, she faced the implication of oppositional terms which construct identity. In Ireland, she was perceived as a colonizer, in England as one of the colonized, and as a female in the first half of the twentieth century she, faced the dichotomous roles defining her as both “wife” and “author.” Psychoanalytic and feminist theory address these issues: psychoanalytic theory reveals the intersection of language/culture, gender, and identity; feminist theory illuminates the hierarchical oppositions within patriarchal discourse which structure our thinking and influence behavior.

I do not presume that my application of these theories to *The Last September* and *The Death of the Heart* provides a “totalizing” reading of the novels. Inevitably these theories will fall out of “out of vogue” and new theories will replace them. Further, while I have not read these novels in a purely historical context, the theories which I use are grounded in a particular historical/social circumstance. Lacanian theory, for example, is not of an ahistorical, universal

language, but is a theory of the structures of language and identity within a specific cultural/historical framework. However, recognition of the temporality of the theories I employ does not render my reading irrelevant or dismissable. While recognition of the hierarchical ordering structures within patriarchal discourse will modify these structures – perhaps, for example, the male/phallus will not always be the dominant signifier – the notion that language is a mediator of our beliefs and identity will endure.

Introduction

Elizabeth Bowen's novels *The Last September* and *The Death of the Heart* would typically be classified as bildungsroman or "coming-of-age" novels. Each begins with a young female who is uncertain of her identity; in the language of the novels, her identity is virtually "absent." The novels follow a traditional plot-line: the protagonist embarks upon a quest for her identity, exploring her identity within her family as daughter and then asserting her identity outside the family as the beloved of a romantic interest. The outcome of these novels, however, is strikingly nontraditional, for each character virtually disappears from the narrative and is "absent" from the endings.

The Last September is set in Ireland during "the Troubles" of 1920 in an Anglo-Irish "Great House," where nineteen-year-old Lois Farquar lives with her aunt and uncle, Lady and Lord Naylor, and her cousin, Laurence. During the one month which the plot covers, Hugo and Francie Montmorency and Gerald, a Black and Tan soldier, become involved in Lois's attempts to discover who she is. Although Lois's mother, Laura, and her father, Mr. Farquar, are dead, Lois refuses to accept her identity as an orphan and attempts to establish her identity as Hugo Montmorency's daughter. Because Hugo had an affair with her mother, Lois believes he might be her father. However, she fails to definitively identify

Hugo as her father and, subsequently, attempts to establish her identity in relation to Gerald. Again, her attempt to establish her identity fails, for Gerald is killed in the line of duty by an IRA rebel. The novel ends with Lois's sudden and almost unexplained absence from the plot line and the burning of the family estate by IRA rebels.

The Death of the Heart is set in London at the home of Thomas and Anna Quayne, who are forced to open their home to sixteen-year-old Portia, Thomas's half-sister, the child of his father's adulterous affair with Portia's mother, Irene. The number of secondary characters and the plot of *The Death of the Heart* are more complex than that of *The Last September*. The first set of characters includes the "help": Matchett, who is head of the Quayne's domestic staff and who was Thomas's parents' maid, and Mrs. Heccomb, Anna's former governess. Their roles as "domestic" help are significant because Portia's involvement with these characters provokes her to explore her identity as the illegitimate daughter in the Quayne family. The second set of characters includes Anna's and Thomas's friends, St. Quentin (an author who is one of Anna's best friends), Eddie (a young man who is also an author and who is employed in Thomas's agency), and Major Brutt (an unwelcomed acquaintance from Anna's past), all of whom become involved in Portia's attempts to discover who she is.

As Portia asserts her identity as daughter, beloved, and writer, these three men either facilitate or challenge her identity. Major Brutt and his gifts of jigsaw puzzles assist Portia in exploring her illegitimate status within her family. Eddie

encourages Portia in the role of beloved, but Portia is dissatisfied in this role. Rather, her identity is predominantly conveyed through a diary she secretly keeps. However, it is her role as the author of this diary that causes much of the conflict in the novel. When Anna, Eddie, and St. Quentin discover that Portia has included them in her writing, they react strongly and negatively to Portia's assuming the role of author. Portia's seeks refuge with Major Brutt when she realizes that in her attempts to assert her identity as daughter, beloved, and author she has alienated herself from her family and lover, and the last detail the reader has of her is that she has fallen asleep in the attic of Brutt's boarding house. Like Lois's, Portia's absence from the novel is sudden, and her presence is never reintroduced into the narrative.

The titles of *The Last September* and *The Death of the Heart* suggest an ending. One would assume, considering the age of the characters and the plot of the novels, that the words "last" and "death" allude to the ending of childhood, but a psychoanalytic and feminist reading of the novels suggests another possibility, that these novels tell of the "dead" end one encounters in the construction of female subjectivity.¹ Bowen explores the various subject positions² available to the female, those of daughter and beloved, but places

¹ The concept of "subjectivity" distinguishes between the terms "individual" and "subject." Poststructuralist theorists refute the notion of an autonomous, stable "individual." Rather than assuming that language transparently expresses a preexisting self, poststructuralist theorists define the "subject" as meaning in process, as the product of discourse. While the term "individual" grants centrality to consciousness, the term "subject" locates the unconscious and cultural/historical circumstances as the principal factors which mediate identity.

insurmountable obstacles in her protagonists's paths: Lois's uncertainty about her father's identity and Portia's illegitimacy prohibit their stable representation in the subject position of daughter; Gerald's death in *The Last September* and Portia's disillusionment with the expectations placed on a female in a romantic relationship in *The Death of the Heart* prohibit representation in the subject position of beloved. Because the traditional plot movement of the female character from daughter to beloved is ruptured and because the characters disappear from the narrative, Bowen precludes the possibility of future subject positions. Rather than the traditional completion of the novel, which would result in either the female's marriage or death, the novels end as they begin—with absence. As Bowen attempts to express the "traditional" plight of a female adolescent, she inevitably encounters the working of patriarchal discourse. The limitation and negation this discourse places on female identity is mirrored by Bowen's limiting and negating plot construction. The "last" of Lois and the "death" of Portia represent the reflection of their figurative absence in their literal absence from the novels.

² The term "subject position" designates the spaces within a language system which a subject temporarily occupies. Subject positions, such as "female" and "male," acquire meaning through their relative position to other/oppositional signifying terms within a language system and confer identity upon the subject.

Chapter I

The Absent Female

The Last September and *The Death of the Heart* record the quest for female subjectivity, focusing on the identity construction of an “unformed” female adolescent (LS 28). Both Lois, of *The Last September*, and Portia, of *The Death of the Heart*, desire that their identity be articulated. The same desire to articulate female subjectivity is implicit in Bowen’s project; however, in her attempt to authorize female identity, she encounters the same obstacle Lois and Portia encounter: language. Through the course of the novels, Lois and Portia attempt to articulate who they are, to evoke the articulation of who they are from other characters, and to reconcile their individual concept of self with its representation by patriarchal discourse. As her medium, patriarchal discourse presents Bowen with the same problems of female misrepresentation and inarticulation as it does Lois and Portia, for as psychoanalytic and feminist critics have revealed, subjectivity exists only as it is articulated in language, and the ideology produced by language constitutes the limits of subjectivity. This relationship between language and identity is, as Jane Gallop says, what “is in

question in psychoanalysis . . . the subject as constituted by the pre-existing signifying chain, that is, by culture, in which the subject must place himself" (11).

With the acquisition of language, the subject learns to represent itself with a signifying concept and enters the symbolic order,³ where "it is defined by a linguistic structure which does not in any way address its being, but which determines its entire cultural existence" (Silverman 166). To represent oneself as a distinct entity and to express this state of being, one must assimilate phallogentric logic and utilize the signifying terms of patriarchal discourse. However, the project to construct female identity is a futile one because, for the female, subjectivity begins with a state of symbolic nonbeing and tragically ends here.

Bowen's texts draw attention to the symbolic representation of the female as an absence and evoke the subject's lack. In *The Last September*, Lois stands outside the family estate and feels that "she and those home surroundings still further penetrated each other mutually in the discovery of a lack" (LS 166). Physical descriptions also reiterate this condition of absence. Throughout *The Death of the Heart*, Bowen describes Portia's "blank dark eyes" and her "vague little smile" and writes that in her own home, she "did not count as a presence" (DH 28, 229). Her position of symbolic nonbeing, like Lois's, is also evident in

³The "symbolic order" is Lacan's term for a closed system of signifiers which acquire meaning through their relation to other signifiers within a particular discourse. Although other cultural activities, such as rituals and ceremonies, are also part of the "symbolic order," the term is

the reaction of others to her. When her sister-in-law, Anna, and St. Quentin enter a drawing room where Portia is sitting, the room “appeared to be empty,” and when they “perceive” Portia, they notice that “her dark dress almost blotted her out against a dark lacquer screen” (*DH* 26).

An examination of the psychology of subjectivity and the ideology of the discourse through which it is expressed reveals that the representation of the female as absence and lack is ultimately the effect of patriarchal discourse. Building on Freud’s theories of psycho-sexual development, theorists such as Jacques Lacan and Helene Cixous have explained an inextricable bond between gender, language, and subjectivity and have revealed that the privileging of male signification in language is built upon “difference” which is, in turn, encoded in a subject’s gender identity. To seek identity is to seek symbolic representation and to be represented by the symbolic is to exist as ‘subjected’ to/by patriarchal discourse. For a female, it is to be constituted “as lack, negativity, absence of meaning, irrationality, chaos, darkness – in short, as non-Being” (Moi 166).

Lacan’s psychoanalytic theories explain that without language there is no understanding of self, that a person’s subjectivity is constituted through her/his identification with signifying concepts represented in expected subject positions and that identity is established through the articulation of self in terms such as “male,” “female,” “daughter,” “son,” “wife,” etc. The substitution of self in

primarily used to refer to language which mediates all other activities and symbolizes meaning through difference and opposition.

language creates a “gap” between the signifying term and the signified concept. Through his three stages of psycho-sexual development, Lacan explains why this gap is more easily bridged by the male subject and why male signification maintains primacy in language.

Lacan explains that a child in the preverbal stage of development recognizes no separation between itself and the mother. Julia Kristeva has expounded upon this pre-verbal stage, explaining that from the time of conception until the acquisition of language, the child exists and communication between the mother and child exists without boundaries and without the mediation of signifiers. Her term for this stage of existence is *semiotic*, for it is a state of being composed wholly of sensory experience: rhythms, pulsations, sounds, and smells. Because “being” in this state is without the signification of language, it is, in Lacan’s vocabulary, “real,” and not “symbolic.”

The child’s recognition that it is a separate entity from the mother marks its entrance into the mirror or imaginary stage. The child begins to see itself as others would, as “another.” In language, this recognition is constituted in the articulation of split subjectivity inherent in the acquired subject positions of “I” and “me.” Thus, as both speaker and subject of the speaker, the child can identify what is “I” and what is “not I” and is able to locate itself within the signifying chain. This stage opens up gaps for the subject, and it is here that an understanding of the subject’s “lack” begins. First, the child experiences a gap

between self and mother, and, second, the child experiences the gap between the self and the representation of self in language, between the child's concept of itself and the self as represented by "I."

The child's entry into the oedipal stage is marked by the recognition of gender, as the child both identifies itself with the same-gender parent and recognizes a difference between itself and the parent of opposite gender. The gender identification of the male child with this father entails "the recognition that his older and more powerful father is also his rival" and that the "Law of the Father" prohibits his desire for the mother (Murfin 226). Lacan explains that while the "Law of the Father" also prohibits the female's desire for the father, it does not impose a schism between mother and child as it does for the male. Consequently, while the male child is forced to separate itself both physically and psychically from the mother, who was at one time the child's whole world, the female child is allowed to retain her close connection to the mother. The effect, according to Lacan, is that "the female subject neither succumbs to as complete an alienation from the real, nor enjoys as full an association with the symbolic as does the male subject. She thus has a privileged relation to the real, but a de-privileged relation to the symbolic" (Silverman 186).

Passages from *The Last September* and *The Death of the Heart* give expression to the "real," semiotic, state and represent the female subject's marginal relationship to the symbolic. When Lois's relationship with her mother is

expressed, the setting is of darkness, enclosure, and explicit verbal articulation is abandoned for semiotic description. In one passage which encompasses the narrator's comment on Laura's pregnancy, Lois is alone outside in a night that is "solid with darkness . . . Laurels breathed coldly and close: on her bare arms the tips of leaves were timid and dank. . . grey patches worse than the dark . . . slipped up her dress knee-high" (*LS* 33). The next instance in which Lois's relationship with her mother is expressed occurs while Lois is hiding in a small "box-room," where "the window was dark with ivy, [and] she could not see out. The room was too damp . . . mustiness came from her mother's old vaulted trunks" (*LS* 136). Lois then discovers her mother's initials carved in the wall and, wondering "how to get out unseen," thinks "why, to what purpose?" (*LS* 132).

Portia's memories of her mother are of the time they traveled together throughout Europe. She thinks of how she and Irene were "untaught" as "they had walked arm-in-arm" and of how "at night had pulled their beds closer together or slept in the same bed – overcoming, as far as might be, the separation of birth" (*DH* 56). Echoing Lois's reluctance to leave the small box-room which fills her with memories of her mother and keeps her hidden from the family, Portia remembers of herself and her mother that "Seldom had they faced up to society – when they did, Irene did the wrong thing, then cried" (*DH* 56). Each of these description evokes the semiotic and expresses the female's marginal relationship to the symbolic: Lois doesn't want to leave the small space

that reminds her of her mother, and when Portia and Irene do venture out of their close space, which minimizes “the separation of birth,” they feel “untaught” and do “the wrong thing” (*DH* 56).

The indisputable, direct physical connection the child experiences with its mother is an important facet of Lacan’s explication of the oedipal stage. During this stage, the child recognizes a difference in its connection to the mother than that to the father. Opposing the child’s connection to the mother is the child’s connection to the father, which is

established through language and a system of marriage and kinship — names — that in turn is basic to the rules of everything from property to law. Thus, gender, for Lacan, is intimately connected in the mind of the developing child with names and language. Or, rather, the *male* gender is tied to that world in an association analogously as intimate as is the mother’s early, physical (including umbilical) connection with the infant. (Murfin 227)

Both the male and female child experience a separation from the mother when the pre-verbal stage is abandoned for the imaginary stage, when the child learns distinctions which are represented in the symbolic order. The move from mother-association, from the “real,” to the symbolic is connected in the child’s mind to father-association, for the relationship to the father is represented through language. Further, a division between the male child and the mother is

imposed by the “Law of the Father.” Because each of these divisions is effected by the symbolic, which is the realm of the father, Lacan asserts that gaps which impose subjectivity, the gap which opens between a mother and a child and the gap the subject discovers between signifiers and signified concepts in language, are each “marked by the phallus and encoded with the boy’s sense of his maleness” (Murfin 227).

The “phallus,” Lacan’s term for the symbolic representation of the penis, is the “signifier for the cultural privileges and positive values which define male subjectivity within patriarchal society, but from which the female subject remains isolated” (Silverman 183). The phallus attains the status of the ultimate signifier in the symbolic order through pairings in language that align positive qualities with the male and opposing qualities with the female. Freud locates this privileging of the male in the signifying terms “masculine” and “feminine.” In addition to the biological differences these terms signify – to Freud, the difference between the presence and absence of a penis – he concludes that “they usually represent ‘activity’ and ‘passivity’” (Mitchell 45). Building on his theory, Cixous concludes that masculine primacy is constituted in language through binary opposites that privilege the male above the female. Her belief is that this “logocentrism” pairs all terms as opposites and allies each term to a representation of either the male or the female. She identifies the following pairs as representative of this hierarchical relationship:

Activity/Passivity

Sun/Moon

Culture/Nature

Day/Night

Father/Mother

Head/Heart

Intelligible/Sensible

Logos/Pathos. (qtd. in Nye 192)

The relationship between the terms in these binary relationships is such that one cannot be defined without its relative position to the other. For example, the definition of the term “male” is derived from its opposition to the term “female”: to be male is to be not female, and to be female is to be not male. Another way of stating this is to say that to be male is to have what the female does not, to have what she lacks. To Freud, the female’s lack was of a penis, which resulted in a corresponding psychological lack. However, Lacan’s theory of the phallus provides a more satisfactory explanation both for the pairings of presence /absence, male/female and for the privileging of the gender that possesses the phallus. His theory of the phallus explains that biological difference does not assume superiority or inferiority unless the difference is symbolized. As Silverman explains, “What is at issue here is not the female subject’s biological

inferiority, but her isolation, that is, from those cultural privileges which define the male subject as potent and sufficient" (Silverman 142).

Because she lacks the symbolic phallus, the female is dependent upon the male subject for symbolic identification. While all subjects experience a sense of lack, this "lack" is more profoundly experienced by the female. Her very entrance into the symbolic order is more difficult than the male's, for neither does she experience the gap between mother and child as profoundly as the male child, nor does she have the male child's analogous relationship to names and naming, to the system of signification. Additionally, her entrance into the symbolic order serves only to further undermine her position. Without access to the symbolic phallus, she is relegated to a dependent status that is guaranteed by the male's supremacy. The primary figures in feminist and psychoanalytic theory have come to the same conclusion. Freud acknowledged that "the 'representation' of femininity . . . has place only inside the models and laws prescribed by masculine subjects" (Nye 150). Lacan revealed "the impossibility of a female identity" and stated that "'there is no woman but excluded by . . . the nature of words'" (Gallop 54; qtd. in Gallop 46). Language fails to represent the female as anything other than an absence or a "kind of 'trou,' or hole, which there are no words to express" (Nye 150). Having been denied legitimate access to the terms that signify presence and activity, the female does not have the means with which to construct her identity, except those prescribed by

patriarchal discourse. Thus, of herself, Lois says that she is “vacant”; that “she couldn’t look on her own eyes, had no idea what she was,” and that “she wasn’t aware of” herself (*LS* 154, 49).

Equally, other characters in the novel have difficulty conceiving of Lois or even articulating her existence as an actual presence. Laurence says that “vacancy . . . made the natural claims of a life on his young cousin”; Livvy says that Lois is “vague”; and Mrs. Vermont and Mrs. Rolfe think Lois is “odd” and “must clearly be outside life” (*LS* 161, 36, 197). It is almost as if Lois and Portia do not exist, or that it would be better if they did not. Laurence, Lois’s cousin, fantasizes that “Lois, naturally, was not born at all,” and Anna, Portia’s sister-in-law, thinks that “it’s a pity she ever was” born (*LS* 107; *DH* 10). Asking herself whether Portia is “a snake, or a rabbit,” Anna reveals her inability to “know” who or what she is; Francie’s statement to Lois, “I don’t know who you’re like,” reveals the same ignorance (*DH* 46; *LS* 21).

The nature of subjectivity for the female is paradoxical. Just as the negating effects of the ideology implicit in language instigates the quest for identity, it also dooms this quest to failure. Lois and Portia want to be represented within the symbolic order so that they may acquire a recognized presence and identity. Giving expression to this desire, Lois equates the symbolic order to a pattern and says, “I like to be in a pattern . . . I like to be related; to have to be what I am. Just to *be* is so intransitive, so lonely” (*LS* 98).

Admitting the same desire but with a deeper understanding of language's power over the subject, Portia says, "The strongest compulsions we feel throughout life are no more than compulsions to repeat a pattern: the pattern is not of our own device" (DH 169). Throughout *The Last September* and *The Death of the Heart*, the terms "pattern," "plan," and "puzzle" suggest the symbolic order. Bowen's terms are fitting, for subjectivity is one and the same with the "plan" of language. The signifying terms which represent subjectivity do not merely express but actually create the "pattern" of existence, for the subject exists within the symbolic order like a piece in a jigsaw puzzle, only by fitting into its precut space. Lois and Portia desire symbolic representation, but their representation cannot exceed passivity and negation. Thus, they are faced with a conundrum: the pattern of existence for a woman, as Cixous explains, is that "Either a woman is passive or she doesn't exist" (qtd. in Moi 105).

Entrance into the symbolic order requires not only that the subject assume signifying terms to represent its identity but also that the subject assume the identity that the signifying term prescribes. Subjectivity, then, is constituted through patterns of signifiers, the relationship between binary terms, and through the relationship between individuals in society who assume the identity signified by language. If, symbolically, the terms "male" and "female" only come into being through the hierarchical relationship they have to one another, and if subjectivity is fundamentally constituted through the acquisition of such

terms, then, socially, identity is constructed through relationships reflecting the same destructive hierarchy. As Cixous's model of binary opposites shows, the relationship between any two opposite terms is held together by the assumption of one term as the positive and the other as the negative. So just as Lois's and Portia's identities are defined by their gender, any subject position they assume is tantamount to the desire to assume a subject position in relation to one's opposite. Thus, the female attempts to overcome her position of lack through relations to the one that signifies presence – the male, ironically the very one who, symbolically speaking, signifies and guarantees a female's "lack." Thus, although Lois and Portia attempt to escape their "particular doom of exclusion" by assuming the roles of daughter and beloved, they will necessarily fail, for it is only because the female is identified as lack that she can fill the position as complement to man (*LS* 23); that is, because she is what he is not, she completes his presence, and conversely, because she is a blank, a variable, she can be inscribed by him. The inevitable conclusion is that although patriarchal discourse is detrimental to female identity construction, the prevailing discourse is a system which indoctrinates its subjects into assuming the roles necessary for its perpetuation.

Chapter II

Subject of the Father

The first subject position upon which the female depends for symbolic identification is that of the father, for by fulfilling the subject position of daughter, the female subject gains access to the phallus. Lacan's theory of the primary importance of the daughter's relationship to the father in constructing her subjectivity is partially based in the writings of Claude Lévi-Strauss, who contemplated identity construction as it occurs in familial and social networks. Lévi-Strauss believed that "each individual is . . . born into an already defined symbolic system and inserted into a fully articulated familial diagram" and that the family, by positioning its members into predefined roles, such as "father," "son," "mother," and "daughter," endows its members with their identity (Silverman 180). Lacan expands Strauss's theories, finding an analogous relationship between the ordering structures of the family, which position the father as "the head of the family," and language, which "derives its coherence from the phallus or paternal signifier" (Silverman 131). Just as the female's symbolic identity is always relative to the phallus, so is her social identity always relative to the father. For Lacan, "the Oedipus complex and language . . . are

'identical'" (Silverman 181). The importance of the daughter's relationship to her father, the centrality of this relationship to Lois's and Portia's identity construction is emphasized throughout *The Last September* and *The Death of the Heart*. Early in each novel, Bowen attributes Lois's and Portia's unstable representation in the subject position of daughter to the father-daughter relationship. Throughout the novels, this instability continues to affect Lois's and Portia's representation in other subject positions and interferes with their relationship to other characters.

Lacan explains that the subject cannot adequately represent itself unless it is able to assume the identity which a subject position assigns, for these positions "are activated only when subjects identify with them" (Silverman 182). The oedipal complex is crucial to constructing subjectivity because, by instilling traits such as activity or passivity, this event allows the subject to assume the traits attributed to either the male or female and, thus, to adequately represent itself in gendered-subject positions. During the female's oedipal complex, the daughter learns passivity and is, consequently, able to represent her "self" symbolically in the signifying chain as "daughter." Further, her indoctrination into the role of passivity psychologically prepares her for the future, expected subject positions of wife and mother. The oedipal complex is, as Mitchell says, the "girl's entry into her female 'destiny'" (96).

The daughter's desire for the father is the result of her recognition that the father possesses what she lacks – the phallus – the ultimate signifier, the literal representation of presence and the symbolic representation of being/subjectivity in language. Because she does not possess the symbolic phallus, her only recourse is to assimilate her identity through secondary identification. As Andrea Nye states, "The girl has no phallus, nor is she but transitorily the owner of the father's name. She has a name, as she has a penis, only through a man, only second hand" (139-40). Once the daughter recognizes that, as possessor of the phallus, her father has what she lacks, she desires him in order to gain access to representation. However, this desire is passive; it is the desire that he value her, or seduce her, thereby legitimizing her existence.

The necessity of the female's subverted desire, her desire to be desired, teaches her to assume the passive subject position of beloved and to abandon the active subject position of lover. This passivity is further internalized when the "Law of the Father," the societal taboo against incest, prohibits the father's desire for the daughter. Her desire is consequently transferred into a desire to "submit to the father's rule . . . by doing his bidding and thus pleasing him" (Gallop 70-71). Further, the father-daughter relationship remains important to the female throughout her life. Unlike the male, who must resolve and move beyond his desire for the mother in order to achieve normal sexual maturity, the female neither has a need nor is she encouraged to abandon her desire for the father. In

"The Subject," Kaja Silverman states that "the most exemplary female subject is one who continues to idealize procreation, and within whose psychic economy the father remains absolutely central" (143).

Both Lois and Portia have difficulty adequately representing themselves in the subject position of daughter because their familial circumstances are abnormal: both are orphaned; Lois believes she was conceived out of wedlock; and Portia is the child of her father's adulterous affair. Their representation in the subject position of daughter is already unstable because it is dependent upon its relative position to the father. In Lois's and Portia's circumstances, this intercourse between "daughter" and "father" is troublesome, absent, and illegitimate. Lois and Portia are unable to reconcile their "selves" with the self as represented by the signifier "daughter," for the events of their oedipal complexes are incomplete and they fail to meet societal expectations of what it "means" to be "daughter." As Lacan explains, this instability will affect future, expected subject positions, as well as these subject's relation to other subjects within the symbolic order.

Portia's half-brother and her sister-in-law, "Thomas and Anna . . . [were] by blood obliged to open their door" to her; she is quite aware that they have taken her into their home not by choice but by obligation and writes in her diary one evening that she, Thomas, and Anna "sat in the drawing-room, and they wished I was not there" (*DH* 149, 115). At Windsor Terrace, Portia's identity is

structured around her role as Mr. Quayne's daughter, but because of her inability to conform to the societally accepted definition of "daughter," her presence is disturbing to those around her. The societally-minded Anna, who concerns herself primarily with the proper style of dress for a female and receiving guests, reacts most strongly to Portia, whose presence is so unbearable to her that she wishes Portia were dead. Angry because Portia has waved to her from the street, Anna says, "She might have been run over, which would have been shocking. But, after all, death runs in that family"; then locating the cause for these violent feelings in Portia's illegitimacy, she says, "What is she, after all? The child of an aberration, the child of a panic, the child of an old chap's pitiful sexuality At the same time she has inherited everything: she marches about this house like the race itself. They rally as if she were the Young Pretender" (*DH* 246).

Just as the entire novel addresses the question, "Who is Portia?", Portia's very presence at Windsor Terrace asks the same troublesome, unanswerable question. Because the number of subject positions available to the female is limited, there are a limited number of answers to this question, none of which sufficiently represents Portia's circumstances. At Windsor Terrace, Portia is "daughter," but somehow she is not daughter. Rather, who she is escapes articulation and leaves the question of who she is unanswered; as Anna says,

"Well, she'll never find any answer [at Windsor Terrace] . . . Who are we to have her questions brought here?" (*DH* 246).

Because her conception was the unplanned result of her father's extra-marital affair, Portia does not feel that her father "desired" her. Not only does she know that she was not "wanted" by him, she knows that her birth affected him negatively, causing his wife to divorce him and his legitimate son to abandon him. On the night her father told his wife that Irene, his mistress, was pregnant, Thomas, his son, "woke to feel something abnormal," and "the idea of the baby embarrassed Thomas intensely on his father's behalf" (*DH* 19, 20). Of the circumstances surrounding Portia's birth, Anna states they are "stupid from the beginning. It was one of those muddles without a scrap of dignity"; "She's made nothing but trouble since before she was born" (*DH* 16, 10). Portia's feelings that she was never "desired" by her father are thus confirmed by other characters. The ramifications of this failure to be satisfactorily oedipalized are evident in a comment her father made to her before his death: "He had felt, he said in the letter, that, because of being his daughter (and from becoming his daughter in the way that she had) Portia had grown up exiled not only from her own country but from *normal, cheerful family life*" (*DH* 15). The effect of her relationship to her father, however, is not only that she has been exiled from the traditional family experience, but that she has been exiled from signification within the symbolic order.

Bowen widens the gap which exists between Portia's understanding of her "self" and its signifying term, an authorial move which threatens Portia's very existence. She becomes "quite a ghost," as Matchett says (*DH* 115). Unable to fully represent herself in the subject position of daughter and consequently excluded symbolically from language, literally from society, Portia doesn't understand who she is or how she fits into the world around her. Her new home is full of "puzzles" and life functions according to "a plan" she doesn't understand. Bowen writes that

She had watched life, since she came to London, with a sort of despair—motivated and busy always, always progressing: even people pausing on bridges seemed to pause with a purpose; no bird seemed to pursue a quite aimless flight. The spring of the works seemed unfound only by her: she could not doubt people knew what they were doing—everywhere she met alert cognisant eyes. She could not believe there was not a plan of the whole set-up in every head but her own. (*DH* 59)

Bowen's use of the words "puzzle" and "plan" suggests the connection between Portia's linguistic and societal exclusion. Both expressing and shaping the condition of society, the plan of language allows for no identity except for that which is prescribed by the discourse. The subject can exist here only as the plan allows for its existence.

The father-daughter relationship is an even more important factor in *The Last September*. Lois's situation is more extreme because she doubts her father's identity. The events in *The Last September* focus largely upon Lois's attempts to locate the father who can fulfill her oedipal desires, conferring a culturally-expected identity upon her and, thus, allowing her to assume a more stable identification with the subject position of daughter. When the novel opens, Lois Farquar is awaiting the arrival of Hugo Montmorency, something she seems to have been doing all her life, for the narrator states that "Mr. Montmorency came out distinct from the rather rare gloom with which she invested her childhood" (LS 13). Although Lois bears the surname of her mother's husband, as a child, Lois fantasized Mr. Montmorency was her father and evidently still holds to her childhood illusions about him; throughout the novel her thoughts focus upon him, and on the day of his expected arrival, she is excessively "nervous" (LS 8). In anticipation of his arrival, "she had been unable to read, had scattered unfinished letters over her table, [and] done the flowers atrociously" (LS 8).

Bowen never confirms or denies Lois's belief that Hugo is her father, leaving unanswered the question of whether Lois is the "child of that unwise marriage" or merely the cause of it (LS 107). This ambiguity allows Bowen to maintain an unbridgeable gap between the signified and the signifier – between Lois's conception of herself and the term "daughter" – and to represent Lois's inability to have a stable concept of her identity. Even if a child accepts the

mother's word on the father's identity, as Lacan explains, the disparity between the child's connection to the mother and to the father undermines the female's position within the symbolic order. Lois's doubting of her mother's word widens the already broad gap between herself and the symbolic order and leads her to believe that her position as daughter is a false one.

Lois's position within her aunt's and uncle's home is troublesome for several reasons. As an orphan living in her aunt and uncle's home, her situation is already somewhat "abnormal," but, additionally, other characters in the novel seem to have questions about her identity as Mr. Farquar's daughter and are troubled by Laura's relationship with this man. The narrator's comments and the thoughts of other characters in the novel focus on legitimacy and marriage: the narrator states that Lois's conception and Laura's pregnancy were marked by fear, "fear before her birth; fear like the earliest germ of her life that had stirred in Laura" (*LS* 33). The cause of this fear is never pinpointed, but Bowen gives evidence that Laura was fearful because she was pregnant and unmarried. This evidence, in one instance, is revealed in Laurence's thoughts as he lies awake in bed wondering why the rebellious "Laura should have married Mr. Farquar . . . the rudest man in Ulster" (*LS* 107). As with the cause of the "fear," no reason for her marriage is given, but the more Laurence muses, the more plausible it becomes that Laura married Mr. Farquar in order to legitimize her pregnancy. At the time of her marriage, Laura felt "confusion" and "writhed in those epic

rages . . . against any prospect in life at all"; "[h]otly, she went up North to attract and marry Mr. Farquar"; and, above all, although she did marry Mr. Farquar, "it was in her to have done otherwise" (*LS* 107).

Lois fears "a particular doom of exclusion" for herself because her parents are absent from her life and because she doubts her father's identity (*LS* 23). This exclusion carries both literal and figurative implications: her exclusion from the normal father-daughter relationship results in her exclusion from an adequate position within the symbolic order, as she cannot represent herself in expected subject positions. Lois attempts to "break in on" this signifying chain by locating Hugo as her father and drawing this admission from him (*LS* 23). Illustrating the importance of establishing her relationship to her father, Lois is particularly drawn to "the intimacy . . . shared by the husband and wife," whose "conjointness," the narrator says, "mean—earth to Lois's roots" (*LS* 23, 71). Her way of "breaking in" on Francie's and Hugo's intimacy and finding a foundation for her "self" in relation to them is by establishing in the presence of the entire family that she and Hugo are related (*LS* 23). Thus, she mentions a fond memory she has of Hugo visiting her when she was a child and says aloud to him, "Do you still go to sleep after dinner?" (*LS* 23). Hugo refuses to admit this relationship and coldly denies Lois's memory. Failing to admit he was ever with her, he says, "you are mixing me up with someone else" (*LS* 23). As he does each time Lois reaches out to him, Hugo refutes her relationship to him and

inadvertently reveals his fear that Laura has told her he is Lois's father. From their first encounter in the novel, when Hugo tells Lois, "I don't think I should have known you," Hugo continually denies her (*LS* 7). Acutely aware of his reactions to her, Lois studies Hugo's expression at the table and believes he is watching her and "[s]eeking a likeness" (*LS* 28). She hopes that Hugo is searching for a family likeness in her appearance, but when she looks directly at him, "his profile was turned away – in, it seemed, the most scornful repudiation" (*LS* 28).

Without Hugo's admission that he is her father, Lois cannot fulfill her subverted desire for him, but as Irigaray explains, "The daughter's desire for her father is desperate: 'the only redemption of her value as girl would be to seduce the father, to draw from him the mark if not the admission of some interest'" (qtd. in Gallop 70); thus, Lois persists in her attempt to create the events of the oedipal romance. Writing her friend Viola, Lois says "that she feared she might be falling in love with" Hugo (*LS* 61). However, when Lois "looked at Mr. Montmorency next morning after breakfast, and still more when she had to drive him back from Mount Isabel, the idea seemed shocking. She regretted having sent her letter to post in such a hurry" (*LS* 61). Continuing to evoke the oedipal romance, Lois reveals her recognition of the "Law of the Father", the taboo against incest, and passively submits to the will of the father.

Lois's fantasizing of the oedipal romance, however, is not sufficient to establish her sense of self, and it is during the drive to Mount Isabel that Lois thinks "a time when they could have talked was gone. They might have said, she felt now, anything; but what had remained unsaid, never conceived in thought, would exercise now a stronger compulsion upon their attitude" (*LS* 62-3). The importance of the explicit admission is reinforced by Hugo's fear that Laura told Lois he is her father, for Lois "looked at him so intently that he was uneasy suddenly: the bottom dropped out of the past, spilling all its security. He would never know how much Laura has said to her daughter those last ten years – years locked away from him: Lois had got the key" (*LS* 64). Despite his thoughts, which support the idea that he may be Lois's biological father more strongly than any other details in the novel, Hugo cowardly repudiates the possibility and, denying Lois the "key" to her identity, says "with acidity: 'If she and I had married . . . My dear child, you wouldn't be there'" (*LS* 64). The private thoughts each has following this exchange are perplexing: Bowen writes that Hugo was "accepting her [Lois] with philosophy as though she were his daughter," and Lois was "comforted in her fancy, as though he had wept coming over the mountains and told her his life was empty because she could never be his wife" (*LS* 67). Hugo's conflicting words and thoughts, his verbalization that he definitely is not Lois's father, and his ensuing, private acceptance of her as his daughter give legitimacy to all the suspicions surrounding his paternity and

validate Lois's confusion. Her thoughts, once again following Hugo's rejection, are transferred into an oedipal fantasy.

In a passage that attempts to define Lois as "daughter," Bowen symbolically illustrates the consequences of language's failure to adequately represent female identity outside of patriarchal discourse. As Francie and Lois discuss Lois's romantic relationship with Gerald, Francie alludes to Hugo's and Laura's relationship and ambiguously "raising her voice to a scared note, as though she must make quite certain what they were really talking about, cried: 'There are such mistakes!'" (*LS* 187). As in all conversations centering on Lois's birth, "what they are really talking about" is not certain, but Francie's "scared" voice and Lois's response support the idea that they are discussing Lois's illegitimate conception, for Lois responds: "I wouldn't mind being properly tragic," suggesting that she wouldn't mind being illegitimate as long as she were certain of her father's identity (*LS* 187). Francie seems to understand Lois's allusion and says, "If one's not quite certain, one never knows where one is" and Lois says, "— It's just that I feel so humiliated the whole time" (*LS* 187). The ambiguity of this passage is so radical that even those speaking are unsure of what they have expressed; in response, Francie "dolefully put a finger over her lips, as though betrayed irrevocably by what had come out of them . . . visibly shrank with misgiving," and Lois "stood there vacantly . . . trying to remember what they had both said, what they had meant, what it had been about" (*LS* 187).

Lois's attempt to figure out the circumstances surrounding her birth is drawn into focus in this passage, and, symbolically, Bowen represents the consequences Lois suffers as she is unable to adequately represent herself in the subject position of daughter: shaken by her admission of an unstable sense of self and the humiliating circumstances surrounding her birth, Lois "lay on her side with knees drawn up to her chin, blankness snowing down on her" (*LS* 188). The tragic cause and effect of language's failure is represented in Bowen's description of Lois's reaction to the conversation: she disappears within the text in a fetal position, "quite snowed up in blankness" (*LS* 188).

By rupturing the availability of the subject position "daughter" – through the ambiguous circumstances surrounding Lois's birth, Portia's illegitimacy, and the absence of both their fathers from their lives – Bowen prohibits her characters' adequate, full identification with the subject position of "daughter" and widens the female's already broad gap between self and signifier. Her texts, thereby, illustrate the limitations patriarchal discourse places on female identity construction, the impossibility of representing "woman" outside of prescribed subject positions, and symbolically represent the instability of subjectivity. Bowen symbolically represents this failure in the dissolution of meaning in passages in the text which center on the father-daughter relationship, passages in which the existence of the characters becomes most elusive.

Chapter III

The Beloved

The daughter is allowed only temporary access to signification through her relationship to the father because the “Law of the Father” forbids her union with him. However, her relationship to the father has instilled in her the necessity to access subjectivity through a male subject. Thus, she must seek her subjectivity through another male subject who can give her not only the “name” her father has “loaned” her but the societally sanctioned desire which validates her being. Lacan’s explanation of the subject’s need to align herself in relation to the male is that “the only way the subject can compensate for its fragmentary condition is by fulfilling its biological destiny – by living out in the most complete sense its own ‘maleness’ or ‘femaleness’ and by forming new sexual unions with members of the opposite sex” (Silverman 153). The second gendered subject position the female seeks, that of beloved/ wife, is both modeled and dependent upon that of daughter, for “the identity of the subject is sustained only through the constant repetition of the same identifications by means of which it first finds itself” (Silverman 161).

The female subject's progression from the position of daughter to beloved/wife and her shifting dependence from father to lover/husband is expressed in both *The Last September* and *The Death of the Heart*. While thinking of how Lois appears "unformed" to him, Hugo hopes "she would marry early" (LS 28). Hugo's thoughts reveal his desire to transfer the responsibility he bears for Lois's half-formed self to another man, for if she marries, his duty will be relieved. Significantly, Hugo's desire is echoed by Portia's father, who, Anna says, "hoped in his heart . . . she'd marry from our [Thomas's and Anna's] house" (DH 15). Both Lois and Portia attempt to fulfill their fathers' desires and to assert their subjectivity in the position of the "beloved." However, because of the hierarchical relationship between the subject positions "male" and "female" and because of Lois's and Portia's unstable representation in the subject position "daughter," the results are unsatisfactory. The female can represent herself symbolically only by representing herself as the male's other, his opposite, which, once again, because his maleness is defined through presence, is absence. She can be his complement only by "aligning herself with the qualities of passivity, exhibitionism, and masochism which make her the perfect 'match' for the properly Oedipalized male subject" (Silverman 143). The female's identity is constituted societally as it is linguistically. Just as the term "female" assumes definition only in relation to the term "male," the female who assumes this subject position functions as a mirror, "giving back a coherent, framed

representation to the appropriately masculine subject" (Gallop 66). Her being is subsumed completely by the male's, so that she does not exist as her "self" but exists only as a reflection of male being.

Lois tragically attempts to fulfill Hugo's desire that she marry early by attaching herself to Gerald, who Lois believes is "a rock," for he represents the qualities of presence and stability she desires for herself; as she says to Francie, Gerald is, "at least . . . definite" (*LS* 191, 187). In addition to Hugo's wish that another man take responsibility for Lois, the connection between Lois's desire to have a relationship with Gerald and her failed relationship with Hugo is evident when she first considers establishing a relationship with Gerald. When Hugo and the others leave Lois outside alone one night, "unregrettingly, slamming the glass doors" against her, she thinks of how Gerald "was most dependable" and how "that was what she now wanted most—his eagerness and constancy" (*LS* 33, 190). Realizing that Gerald is willing to give her the identity that Hugo would not, Lois exclaims, "Oh, I do want you!" (*LS* 33). Represented by patriarchal discourse as a nonentity, Lois believes that she can only find "happiness" and "safety" through a relationship with a male, for she admits to Gerald that she is "vacant" (*LS* 191, 154); the narrator states that "she couldn't look on her own eyes, had no idea what she was, resented almost his [Gerald's] attention being so constantly fixed on something she wasn't aware of" (*LS* 49); she desires to tell him, "You sometimes make me" (*LS* 190); and she responds to

his question of what she would lose without their relationship, by admitting that she would lose “[e]verything” (*LS* 191).

Similarly unable to rectify the circumstances of her birth and to find acceptance both in language and in society through her role as daughter, Portia also attempts to assert her subjectivity by aligning herself with a male subject position and assuming the subject position of “beloved.” When Eddie, the twenty-three-year-old friend of Anna's, expresses a romantic interest in her, Portia discovers a new possibility for her “self.” For the first time, she experiences an understanding of who she can be and how she can fit into the world around her. Again, Bowen’s word choices draw a connection between the symbolic order and establishing identity, for although Portia feels that for her “self” fitting into the role of daughter was like trying to fit a misshapen piece into a jigsaw “puzzle,” “the force of Eddie's behaviour whirled her free of a hundred puzzling humiliations, of her hundred failures to take the ordinary cue” (*DH* 105). As her “friend and lover,” Eddie “made life fall, round him and her, into a new poetic order at once” (*DH* 105). Although Portia’s “unpreparedness, her lack of policy . . . made Windsor Terrace, for her, the court of an incomprehensible law – with Eddie [it] stood her in good stead. She had no point to stick to, nothing to unlearn” (*DH* 105).

The narrator's comments following Portia's realization that she can assume the role of beloved express language's power to confer identity upon its subjects. Bowen writes that

Innocence so constantly finds itself in a false position that inwardly innocent people learn to be disingenuous. Finding no language in which to speak in their own terms they resign themselves to being translated imperfectly. They exist alone; when they try to enter into relations they compromise falsifyingly – through anxiety, through desire to impart and to feel warmth. (*DH* 106)

Although the subject position of "beloved" is a misrepresentation of Portia, she feels her exclusion so acutely and so desires to be like others, existing with a purpose inside the plan, she accepts this role "falsifyingly" because it allows her entrance into the symbolic order. The limited options available to Portia tragically illustrate Cixous's comment that "either woman is passive or she doesn't exist," (qtd. in *Moi* 105) and as the consequences of Portia's choice are revealed, the discourse of the novel portrays the ironically negating effects of this misrepresentation (qtd. in *Moi* 105). Like Lois, Portia yields passively to Eddie, and, again, Bowen uses mirror imagery to evoke the female's non-presence, for Portia looks "past Eddie liquidly, into nowhere, as though she did not exist because she might not look at him"; she makes "herself so much his open piano that she felt her lips smile by reflex, as though they were his lips"; she "now

referred to Eddie everything that could happen: she saw him in everything that she saw" (*DH* 96, 105, 149). Although she has sought her relationship with Eddie so that she might access signification, the only representation language allows her is non-being. Thus, once again, Bowen's female subject is defeated in her attempts at identity construction, for Eddie "treated her like an element (air, for instance) or a condition (darkness) He could look right through her, without a flicker of seeing" (*DH* 191). "Only Portia had this forbidding intimacy with him — she was the only person to whom he need not pretend that she had not ceased existing when, for him, she had ceased to exist No presence could be less insistent than hers" (*DH* 191).

Portia's thoughts focus intensely upon the role signification and society play in creating identity. Bowen writes that "so anxious was her [Portia's] research that every look, every movement, every object had a quite political seriousness for her: nothing was not weighed down by significance" (*DH* 59). Portia comes to understand that this system of signification is detrimental to her concept of the "individual," for she realizes that without the means to express themselves except as this signification allows "individual persons were surely damned" (*DH* 60). In addition to knowing that language does not allow for individuality but only allows forms fitting into the pattern, Portia knows that it is impossible to exist otherwise because "Life militates against the seclusion we seek" (*DH* 170). As she plays her role in this system, Portia finds both reward

and disillusion in being the beloved. Her reward comes from the immediate acceptance she receives from others upon their learning that she is “attached” to a man, but disillusion soon follows when she learns that having assumed the paired subject positions of male and female, she and Eddie exist, in Portia’s vocabulary, without “individuality.” In other words, Portia discovers that relationships between subjects reflect the relationship between signifiers in the symbolic order, a relationship which rigidly confers identity upon subjects and is quite negative for the female.

In the second section of *The Death of the Heart*, “The Flesh,” Portia is sent to Seale, a seaside town, to stay with Mrs. Heccomb, Anna’s former governess. As if to assist Portia’s continuing attempts to piece together her role in the signifying order, Major Brutt sends her another puzzle, which she immediately begins to assemble. However, without Eddie’s presence, Portia becomes unsure again of her identity. Not only are those around her somewhat disturbed by her precarious identity as an orphan and as Thomas’s and Anna’s daughter/sister, but also, at Seale, she explores more fully the role she has recently assumed in relationship to a male. After dressing for her first dancing party, where she will pair herself with a number of male partners, Portia stands before a mirror but does not see herself. Appropriately represented as merely the other to her possible male partners’ presence, she “looked past herself in the mirror” (*DH* 161). Then reassuring herself that she is Eddie’s beloved, she sees “her partners

with no faces” and thinks “whoever she danced with, it would always be Eddie” (*DH* 162).

Bowen’s language in the following dance scene clearly evokes the destructive hierarchy at work in the male-female relationship. Portia’s first dancing partner is Dickie, Mrs. Heccomb’s oldest son, who dominates Portia completely in their dance:

She began to experience the sensation of being firmly trotted backwards and forwards, and at each corner slowly spun like a top. Looking up, she saw Dickie wear the expression many people wear when they drive a car. Dickie controlled her by the pressure of a thumb under her shoulder blade; he supported her wrist between his other thumb and a forefinger — when another couple approached he would double her arm up, like someone shutting a penknife in a hurry. Crucified on his chest against his breathing, she felt her feet brush the floor like any marionette's Taking her more in hand, he splayed the whole of one palm against her ribs and continued to make her foxtrot. (*DH* 165-6)

Portia’s next significant experience at the party leads her to a disturbing realization. Following Bowen’s depiction of the nature of the male’s active and the female’s passive roles — he the spinner, she the top; he the driver, she the car; he the puppet master, she the puppet — Portia realizes that individuality does not

truly exist. Because language conscripts individuals into subject positions and assigns personality traits which are most fundamentally delineated by gender, the subject does not express who s/he is through language but is who s/he is because of the language. She is led to this realization by Mr. Bursely's question, "Anyone ever told you you're a sweet little kid?", which makes her think of Eddie (*DH* 168). This question "set up such disconcerting echoes" that "she had run away from it in her mind" (*DH* 169). Mr. Bursely's calling her "a sweet little kid" echoes what she realizes in the only thing Eddie has ever called her, and because Mr. Bursely has "unwittingly caricatured" Eddie, the personalities of these two males becomes so confused in her mind that she is "forced . . . to ask herself, whether, last night on the settee, it had not been Eddie that emerged from the bush" (*DH* 172). Further, she realizes that from the time of the party "she had not once thought of Eddie" (*DH* 169). Portia's experience with the rigid roles conferred upon the subject by language leads to her questioning whether any relationship is not just the workings of the plan of language or the plan of society; she wondered "whether a feeling could spring straight from the heart, be imperative, without being original. But if love were original, if it were the unique device of two unique spirits, its importance would not be granted; it could not make a great common law felt" (*DH* 169). Bowen's use of the word law in conjunction with romance resonates with Lacan's concept of the "Law of the Father" and the working of this law to indoctrinate subjects

necessary to its perpetuation. Portia's understanding that she does not love Eddie, that he could be Mr. Bursely, that any of her dancing partners could be him, that her being passive and a sweet little kid draws not just Eddie to her but a number of partners who could take his place, has such a profound effect on her that "she was shocked by this loss or change in her nature, as she might have been by a change in her own body" (*DH* 186).

As if to counter the doubts she has begun to have about her relationship with Eddie, Portia invites him to visit her at Seale. At first, Eddie's visit is very satisfactory for Portia, and she is pleased with the reaction she receives by positioning herself as Eddie's beloved. Although Daphne, Mrs. Heccomb's daughter, previously snubbed her because she feels Portia is "high-strung" and because she lives with Anna, whom Daphne dislikes, upon learning that Portia has a boyfriend who is coming to visit, she looked at Portia "with a touch of respect" (*DH* 176). Daphne's friends are also impressed when Portia mentions Eddie's visit, showing "several shades more regard for her" (*DH* 178). She is not even interested in her puzzle after Eddie arrives, "into which before he came, she had fitted her hopes and fears," and she looks at it as if "it were a thing left from another age" (*DH* 190). However, it is during this visit that Portia learns that the subject position of beloved is another in which she cannot fully represent herself, for as soon as she begins to "have ideas" of her own, to protest against her

submissive role in the relationship, and to demand “the whole” of Eddie, he turns away from her (*DH* 212, 214).

While Portia and Eddie are seated beside one another in the theater, Portia sees him take Daphne’s hand. Mr. Bursely’s assumption of Eddie’s role is mimicked as Portia feels that Daphne has appropriated her own position, and Portia’s fears that the male-female relationship does not arise from any “individuality” are fulfilled. Portia’s refusal to accept Eddie’s behavior leads to a confrontation with Daphne, during which Lois’s puzzle sits significantly between the two. When Daphne attempts to warn Portia that Eddie is “the sort of boy who can’t help playing a person up,” Portia accuses her of not minding Eddie’s advances. Daphne’s anger at Portia is similar to Anna’s anger the day Portia waves to her from the street, and her words strongly echo Anna’s:

Now Portia, you look here – if you can’t talk like a lady, you just take that puzzle away and finish it somewhere else. Blocking up the whole place with the thing This all simply goes to show the way you’re brought up at home, and I am really surprised at them, I must say. You just take that awful puzzle up to your room and finish it there, if you’re really so anxious to. You get on my nerves, always picking about with it. And this is *our* sun porch, if I may say so. (*DH* 204)

Whereas Anna is disturbed because Portia doesn’t fulfill the role of daughter as she thinks she should, Daphne is angered because Portia doesn’t properly

assume the role of “lady,” and just as Anna is angered that Portia has brought questions of her identity to Windsor Terrace, Daphne is unnerved by Portia’s “puzzle.” Further, she attributes Portia’s behavior and the disturbing effect it has on the household at Seale to Portia’s birth and reiterates her dislocated identity by establishing that she is not a legitimate part of the Heccomb’s home. Portia, Daphne says, doesn’t “understand a single thing”; “Have you got *no* ideas?” she asks (*DH* 205). Locating the cause of her inability to understand life and her position therein to the conditions surrounding her birth, Portia responds, “I’ve no idea . . . For instance, my relations who are still alive have no idea why I was born. I mean, why my father and mother —” but Daphne refuses to let her finish and says, “You’d really *better* shut up” (*DH* 205).

Section two ends with Portia isolated from the narration of the chapter — only the pages of her diary record the events of her last weeks at Seale. Having tried to establish her identity before the Heccombs as Eddie’s beloved and failed, only to have her precarious identity of daughter brought to the surface again, Portia disappears. Once again she has failed to piece together her identity and to assume a subject position which satisfies her quest for identity. She writes, “I have gone on with the puzzle, it has been knocked, so part that I did is undone and I could not begin again where I left off” (*DH* 222).

Chapter IV

Assuming Authorship

Subjectivity is legislated both by the ideology produced in language and by society's enforcement of this ideology. Although gender is a discursive construction assigned to a person based upon her/his biological condition, society often views gender as "natural," as a person's biological destiny. Lacan's theory of psycho-sexual development explains how the link between language, gender, and subjectivity results in the societal acceptance of traits such as passivity or activity as inextricably bound to a person's biological difference, to female- or maleness. According to Lacanian theory, gender is the fundamental factor that governs an individual's ability to represent her/himself in particular subject positions. Thus, the individual who struggles against the gendered-definition of self in language struggles not only against the language but also against society's enforcement of behavioral norms, against society's acceptance of those who conform to gender-specific subject positions and its rejection of those who do not. As Chris Weedon explains, "Forms of subjectivity which challenge the power of the dominant discourses at any particular time are carefully policed. Often they are marginalized as mad or criminal" (91). For this reason,

the subject tends to assume gender-specific subject positions out of a belief that to do otherwise would be “unnatural.” In her discussion of the “availability” of subject positions, Weedon explains that “Whereas, in principle, the individual is open to all forms of subjectivity, in reality individual access to subjectivity is governed by historically specific social factors and the forms of power at work in a particular society,” such as, “gender, race, class, age and cultural background” (Weedon 95).

Linguistically, a subject position such as “author” is aligned with traits such as logic, reason, authority, and activity — traits encoded in the male. Because of this, a female, whose gender is encoded with “opposite” traits, will experience difficulty asserting her subjectivity in this subject position. If viewed as “natural,” the gendered traits assigned to the female by patriarchal discourse preclude the possibility of fully representing herself as both “female” and “author.” To participate in the creative act of writing is to assume the gendered traits assigned to the male by patriarchal discourse, and if these traits are viewed as “natural,” the female will face an unbridgeable gap between herself as female and herself as author.

The acceptance of these linguistically legislated roles is evident in the overwhelmingly male literary tradition which has created the almost archetypal symbols of the male as artist and the female as his muse and which has maintained a closed society, canonizing its male authors and diminishing the

majority of females who have attempted to assume authorship: "authors and critics alike, equating the penis with the pen and imagining the author as pregnant with his text, have reserved both the origin and the nurturance of texts for themselves, have, we may say, devised an unnatural dynasty of texts sired, conceived, and borne by fathers" (Weekes 8).

Wielding the most powerful and pervasive weapon of patriarchal society, Elizabeth Bowen explores language as it is used against and by the female. In *The Last September*, she depicts the linguistic and societal construction of female subjectivity, focusing specifically on Lois's fear of having her identity inaccurately trapped in language. In *The Death of the Heart*, she explores female authorship, depicting the difficulties Portia faces as she attempts to assert her subjectivity as a writer. Lois's fears and Portia's difficulties must be similar to the fears and difficulties Bowen experienced as she undertook the male-privileged act of writing and authored her own texts. Throughout her novels, Bowen exhibits an awareness of the power language holds over its subjects and of society's recognition of the act of authorship as an "appropriately" male act. Further, the novels demonstrate the limiting effects of patriarchal discourse on female subjectivity. They depict the limited number of subject positions available to the female and the difficulty the female encounters fully representing herself in gendered subject positions, which are dependent upon phallic signification and which ultimately define the female subject as "absence."

Thus, Bowen's project of authoring female identity is complicated, first, because she is utilizing a medium which imprisons the female subject in an inaccurate and negative definition and, second, because she, herself, faces the misrepresentation of herself in language: her act of writing not only embodies the misrepresentation of herself that is trapped in language as one who "naturally" should not write, but it also reproduces this same misrepresentation.

Three characters in *The Death of the Heart*, St. Quentin, Eddie, and Portia, assume authorship, but while the two male authors are celebrated, only Portia encounters hostility and rejection because of her writing. The value placed on the male act of writing is evident in Portia's and Lillian's comments about these two male authors. When Portia tells Lillian that she met St. Quentin on the street and was invited to tea with him, Lillian replies, "You are only pleased you nearly had tea with St. Quentin because he is an author" (DH 269). Revealing the esteem with which she also views male writers, Portia then says, "Eddie *has* been an author, if it comes to that" (DH 269).

This novel opens with a conversation between Anna and St. Quentin that expresses the dilemmas faced by the female writer. Anna, who has discovered and read Portia's diary, is outraged that Portia is secretly writing and tells St. Quentin that the diary "was not a bit like . . . [his] beautiful books. In fact it was not like *writing* at all" (DH 11). While she praises the male act of authorship, Anna reveals that Portia's writing angers her because it is female writing, which

is “not like” male writing. Her criticism that the diary is “deeply hysterical” further suggests the belief that a female's biological condition, having a uterus, engenders her psychological, emotional, and intellectual condition (*DH* 10). Anna's complaint suggests that Portia's sex precludes certain subject positions, such as author, which are defined by reason, logic, and authority. She is outraged at Portia's having assumed an inappropriate subject position and attempts to suppress Portia's challenging of normative subject positions by labeling Portia's act of authorship as “unnatural”: “That diary could not be worse than it is I mean, more completely distorted and distorting. As I read I thought, either this girl or I are mad. And I don't think I am, do you?” (*DH* 10).

Anna's comment that Portia is “mad” reveals society's tendency to marginalize and discredit behaviors that are subversive to the patriarchy. As a private act of writing, a diary would have been an acceptable act for a female to undertake, but Anna makes the situation problematic by publicizing the diary. Anna's reaction to Portia's writing is against the authority Portia has assumed in representing others in her writing. Portia's representation of Anna seems to contradict Anna's sense of self, for she says, her “diary's very good — you see, she has got us taped. Could I not go on with a book all about ourselves? I don't say it has changed the course of my life, but it's given me a rather more disagreeable feeling about being alive — or at least about being me” (*DH* 304). Anna is disturbed by the realization that as a writer, Portia has gained power over those

she objectifies as her subjects, a power normally reserved for the male, and she reacts by attempting to deny Portia any subjectivity, even the right to self-expression.

St. Quentin, too, is disturbed by the role reversal which occurs because of Portia's writing. Upon learning that Portia has also written about him in her diary, he realizes that she must have studied him in order to collect details for her writing and says, "Fancy her watching me!" (DH 12). Then, like Anna, he expresses his belief that this is an "unnatural" act and discredits the act of female authorship in his exclamation, "What a little monster she must be" (DH 12). Society's policing of subject positions is further evident in St. Quentin's and Eddie's direct comments to Portia. St. Quentin tells her,

You do a most dangerous thing. All the time, you go making connexions – and that can be a vice You're working on us, making us into something. Which is not fair – we are not on our guard with you. For instance, now I know you keep this book, I shall always feel involved in some sort of plan. You precipitate things. I daresay that what you write is quite silly, but all the same, you are taking a liberty. You set traps for us. You ruin our free will You put constructions on things. You are a most dangerous girl. (DH 249-50)

And Eddie tells Portia, "I don't want you to *write* about you and me. In fact you must never write about me at all. Will you promise me you will never do that? . .

. . I won't have you choosing words about me. If you ever start that, your diary will become a horrible trap, and I can't feel safe with you any more" (*DH* 108-9). Ironically, the constructions Portia's writing puts on things can be no more powerful or dangerous than are St. Quentin's, for they use the same medium, just as the traps she sets are none other than those set by all writers. The difference is that Portia's assuming the subject position of author is "dangerous" to the patriarchy because it challenges the exclusive reservation of powerful and active subject positions for the male, and to challenge the male's dominant position in the prevailing hierarchy is to challenge the fundamental assumption which informs each subject's understanding of his or her identity. However, the belief that subject positions are "naturally" gender-specific renders Portia's challenge impotent: her subjectivity is discredited "as quite silly," and her writing is marginalized as "unnatural," "dangerous," "hysterical," "mad," and "monster"ous (*DH* 250, 10, 12).

Harriet Chessman's analysis of *The Death of the Heart* is that the text "manifests itself . . . [in] a sense of guilt at the act of authorship itself, as well as a fear that no form of language or story can be found that isn't 'distorted and distorting'" (Chessman 81; *DH* 7). Herein lies the second factor of Bowen's anxiety of authorship, for not only does she encounter her own misrepresentation of self as it is trapped in language as one who "naturally" should not write, but she also traps her characters in this same misrepresentation. Anna's,

St. Quentin's, and Eddie's protests against Portia's writing reveal both awareness of how the subject is not revealed transparently through language but is actually "trapped" and "taped" in language and an accusation that the female writer who sets these traps is "dangerous" (*DH* 250). Anna now has a "disagreeable feeling about being alive," and Eddie "can't feel safe with" Portia any longer (*DH* 304, 109). Like Portia, Bowen has only one tool with which she can construct her subjects, and to utilize this medium is inevitably to uphold a discourse which is "distorting" (or limiting and negative) for women. Chessman writes that Bowen's own anxieties of authorship are projected in the accusations Portia's suffers: "'You are a most dangerous girl,' Bowen could be saying . . . to herself" (*DH* 250; Chessman 81).

Bowen's only recourse, however, if she does not to set traps for her characters is to leave them outside the symbolic order. Quoting Jane Austen's Henry Tilney, Gilbert and Gubar write that "'a woman's only power is the power of refusal' Rejecting the poisoned apples her culture offers her, the woman writer often becomes in some sense anorexic, resolutely closing her mouth on silence" (298). This seems to be the course of action Bowen chooses in a passage from *The Last September* that expresses the same awareness of the power language holds over its subjects. "Caught in her bedroom," Lois overhears Lady Naylor and Francie discussing her (*LS* 60). She hears in their tones "a keen hunting note" and feels that their voices "came after her" and "penetrated

like the Hound of Heaven" (LS 60). When Francie attempts to articulate the condition of Lois's existence and begins the sentence "Lois is so very —," Lois becomes "scared" (LS 59). And out of a fear that Francie's words might create an unacceptable identity for her, Lois prevents the completion of the statement by creating a disturbance. "She lifted her water jug and banged it down in the basin: she kicked the slop-pail and pushed the washstand about . . ." (LS 60). Bowen writes that Lois "didn't want to know what she was, she couldn't bear to: knowledge of this would stop, seal, finish one. Was she now to be clapped down under an adjective, to crawl round lifelong inside some quality like a fly in a tumbler?" (LS 60). Bowen's answer to this question is a resolute "no." In rebellion against the power language holds over its subject, she creates a disturbance, kicking and banging, and in the ensuing silence she prevents Lois from becoming trapped in the language. Of this disturbance and silence Bowen writes, "It was victory" (LS 60). But was it? Bowen writes each time Lois would see the crack she made in the basin, Lois "would wonder: what Lois *was* —" but "She would never know" (LS 60). The untenable choice patriarchal discourse offers the female is evident in this passage — the subject can know herself only as the discourse defines her. The tragic victory Bowen has won is to return her female subject to the position of inarticulated non-being from which she began her search for identity.

In a second conversation that leads to Lois's disappearance from the novel, Bowen connects Lois's failure to assume the subject position of beloved to her failure to have adequately assumed that of daughter and, again, illustrates that this failure results in the symbolic loss of "self." As Lady Naylor and Lois ostensibly discuss Lois's relationship with Gerald, Lady Naylor first tells Lois that marriage to Gerald is unthinkable because, in her opinion, Lois has "no conception of love" (*LS* 167). The significance of this statement is, first, in its implication that Laura's conception of Lois was without love and, second, that because of this, Lois will fail to assume the subject position of beloved. The connection between Lois's struggle to assert her subjectivity and the circumstances surrounding her birth becomes more evident as the conversation progresses and Lady Naylor repeats a second time that Lois "has no conception" (*LS* 167). The phrase becomes a sort of refrain which is echoed by Lois and repeated a third time by Lady Naylor so that in the language of the novel, which creates Lois for the reader, Lois loses her "conception" and, thus, her existence. The conversation concludes with Lois's staring significantly at her "aunt's ringed hands," a reminder to Lois that Laura and Hugo never married, and her admission that she "didn't want to be clandestine," an expression of her desire to have her identity definitively stated (*LS* 169). However, as the repetition of the phrase that Lois "has no conception" suggests, as Bowen's text symbolically illustrates, because patriarchal discourse fails to "conceive" of (or articulate) the

female as a presence, Lois's desires will not be fulfilled. She cannot escape her "clandestine" representation (LS 169).

The "loss" of Lois in this and other ambiguous passages symbolically illustrates the loss of the subject as it is subsumed by the signifying concepts which represent its being. Both Lois and Portia have attempted to represent their "selves" in the subject positions of "daughter" and "beloved," but, even if they could identify the "self" with the identity decreed by these terms, their identity could never escape its representation by patriarchal discourse as an absence. As Bowen states in both *The Last September* and *The Death of the Heart*, language is a trap. Bowen's only recourse, however, if she does not allow her characters to be trapped in the language is to leave them outside the symbolic order, abandoning their representation completely at the end of each book.

After a brief narration in which Lois learns of Gerald's death, Lois is never reintroduced into the narrative. The only information the reader has is Lady Naylor's statement that she's gone, to "Tours. For her French" (LS 204). After Portia learns that her family and friends have read her diary and are displeased with her, she runs away from home. The last detail Bowen gives the reader is that she has fallen asleep in the attic of Major Brutt's boarding house, followed by the narrator's comment that Portia seemed

to abandon being a woman—she was like one of those children in a

Elizabethan play who are led on, led off, hardly speak, and are known to

be bound for some tragic fate which will be told in a line; they do not appear again; their existence, their point of view has had, throughout, an unreality. At the same time, her body looked like some drifting object that has been lodged for a moment, by some trick of the current, under a bank, but must be dislodged again and go on twirling down the implacable stream. (*DH* 298)

This commentary seems to be Bowen's admission of Portia's fate, of the fate of any female represented in the symbolic order. Bowen's texts illustrate this dilemma, for, as Chessman explains,

What emerges is the problematic of how women can produce their own stories, as subject, without being 'appropriated to and by the masculine.' Bowen scatters her novels with female figures who not only resist the narratives they see around them, but who themselves have no language, and who therefore cannot generate other texts. These figures haunt her: they represent the unarticulated and inchoate femaleness which must in some sense be betrayed or at least abandoned, in the very act of entering language to tell stories. (71)

The Last September and *The Death of the Heart* would classically be labeled as bildungsroman or coming-of-age novels. The plot of each centers upon a female protagonist's struggle, first, to establish her identity within her family home and, second, to establish her identity independently from her family in a

romantic relationship with a man. Following a traditional plot line, each of these protagonists experiences her first “heartbreak,” as the romantic relationship fails. At this point, however, the traditional plot structure ends, for Lois and Portia virtually disappear from the story line. Rather than conforming to the traditional destiny for the female characters in realistic novels, which includes either the female's marriage or her death, *The Last September* closes with Lois' absence and *The Death of the Heart* with Portia asleep in a dark attic.

The application of psychoanalytic and feminist theory explains this “failure” of the novels, of Bowen, to comply with the traditional plot structure. Lois and Portia, unable to adequately represent the self as “daughter” and, consequently, unable to fulfill the role of “beloved,” have no place to go. Psychoanalytic and feminist theory reveal that the central conflict in *The Last September* is neither Lois's attempt to identify Hugo as her father, nor her loss of Gerald; just as the central conflict in *The Death of the Heart* is neither Portia's reconciliation with her half-brother, nor her failed love affair with Eddie. Rather, for Bowen, as a writer, the central conflict is the constitution of the identity of these characters through language. The constructs of the plot do not constitute the conflict but are inevitable results of the conflict which exists between being and subjectivity as it is constituted in language. One conflict is projected /displaced into another. Bowen eschews the traditional ending, but her character's inability to define their “selves” leaves them in a discursive and, thus,

existential void. Their conflict is, in turn, Bowen's conflict. Lois's and Portia's search for identity fails because the author can articulate it only in and through the language, which means to express it through the patriarchal paradigm, and paradoxically, the very act of such articulation dooms a woman's identity to inarticulation. To finish the telling of their stories is to be complicit in sealing their fate as blank, absent beings. Bowen's only alternative, then, is to abandon the project of articulating their identity. We know something bad will happen to them, like the child actors, but Bowen won't produce the show. She stops where she began—defeated, passive, and submissive—with two blank and absent characters.

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